

On connections.

Laura Macchini - 2nd trimester essay

and yes, it is a broad subject.
wordcount: 2791

A couple of months ago, I bought a new phone.

As I was filling my contacts I was presented with the opportunity to synchronize with my Facebook account, I agreed; half an hour later, seven hundred and fifty people were added to my list, with email addresses, phone numbers and a little nice squared picture.

I remember asking myself "do I really want to talk with these people? All of them?" The answer was no, I realized that some of those seven hundred, I didn't recall how we met, if ever so; others were acquaintances that belonged to an earlier part of my life, and we did not really have anything in common anymore. I decided to start cleaning up that long list and keep only the people I really had a real intention to speak to. I kept a third.

It was the action of a moment, a sudden urge cleanse, purify, make room for new connections perhaps, but shortly after that I found myself wondering how did all of it happen. What pushed me to add all of those people as "friends" in the first place?

Was it peer pressure- the need to have more and more friends in order to look better in front of the community? Maybe I was fooled, I concluded, like many others, into thinking that being part of a social network consists of making everyday new connections with more and more peers, regardless of the relationship we shared.

This is where my questioning of those relationships began.

we are all connected

The idealist sees planet Earth converging. Computer networks foster virtual communities that cut across geographies and time zones. Virtual communities seem to heal isolated people locked in metal boxes on urban freeways. Through computer networks, the population can socialize while shopping, learning, and business are only a mouse click away. The telephone and the television seem to have been mere beginnings of a more powerful, multi-sensory, interactive telepresence. "Virtual communities" recall McLuhan's "global village" and Teilhard's "Omega Point."

With these words M. Heim opens his paper "Virtual Realism"; it was 1998, thirteen years ago; Facebook would have us believe that this has really happened, that "through computer networks the population can socialize while shopping, learning and business are only a mouse click away".

Heim continues his analysis on the introduction of the computer, alongside with Internet, in the society, portraying two contrary positions, which he calls "Network Idealism" and "Naive Realism".

The Network Idealist sees the computer network as a world of freedom and opportunity, in which information and culture are openly shared and we are free from the restrictions of time and space; the Naive Realist, on the other hand, worries about the lack of face-to-face interaction, real human connection, and is very well aware of the higher surveillance that comes with digital communications.

"Naive realism and network idealism belong together in the cyberspace continuum. They are binary brothers. One launches forth with unreserved optimism; the other lashes back with a plea to ground ourselves outside technology in primary reality"

Most of us do not stand clear in the positions of Naive Realist of Network Idealist; a realistic guess would have us look for some sort of *golden mean*, a balance that juxtaposes our need for digital connections, with the sheer authenticity of the analog ones.

This essay argues the consequences of Internet and Anytime Anywhere Media to or social interactions, the urge that results to participate at every cost, and if being constantly tethered makes us, in conclusion, lonelier.

the necessity of a constantly expanding network

Barabási (2011) is making a parallel between social networks (where we intend them as connections between people) and other kinds of networks, such as interactions between proteins in living organisms, or the link relations between web pages.



Figure I.1

Protein interaction network of yeast, an organism often studied in biological labs. Each node corresponds to a protein and two proteins are linked together if there is experimental evidence that they interact with each other in the cell. The color of the nodes denote their essentiality: dark gray proteins are those without which the organism cannot survive, while light gray are those that the organism can live without. Note the uneven link distribution: most proteins link to one or a few nodes only, while a few proteins act as hubs, having links to dozens of other proteins.

"No matter what network you look at, the typical distances are short. [...] This is not a property of social networks only. We see it in the Web. We see it in the cell. We see it in all different types of networks. (Figure I.1) The small world phenomenon is important because it completely destroys the notion of space. Indeed, two people can be very far away if you measure their physical distance. And yet, when you look at the social distance between them, it is typically relatively short." He suggests, further in his presentation that none of the networks he analyzed can be described with the model of the random network, on the contrary all of them share the same architecture: a small number of "hubs" with several connections linked to small nodes with few connections. "The networks we see have always gone through, and continue to go through, an expansion process." he clarifies "That is, they are always adding new nodes, and this growth is essential to the network."

We are indeed all connected, and if not, social networks persistently suggest us to import and synchronize contacts "connect with friends", Facebook, Twitter and most platforms use the word "friend", but are these people we are connected to ultimately our friends?

These people we are encouraged to connect to are "essential to the network", without them we are a dead end in the scheme, but what does this urge to reach out mean? How has this influenced our ways of interacting?

dividing our attention

"We all media multitask. As I work on this chapter, my e-mail box, music player, photo application, and several tabs on my two favorite browsers are all open on my computer screen. But the young and the digital are widely viewed as masterful multitaskers, capable of managing several technologies, screens, and conversations fluidly and simultaneously. They multitask habitually and according to many observers, they also do it instinctively." Watkins (2009, p.162)

Turkle (2011) states that "Experts went so far as to declare multitasking not just a skill but *the* crucial skill for successful work and learning in digital culture". It is indeed a common trait. Multitasking is also psychologically rewarding: our body perceives the chemical pleasure of beginning something, and "the high deceives multitaskers into thinking they are being especially productive".

The same approach to social relationships results in distributing our attention between numerous peers, beginning but not finishing conversations, in other words *caring less for each*.

Dividing our attentions between a Skype conversation with the family and the phone, email and Facebook, may feel extremely productive – excellent managing of time – but will the people we are talking to notice our delay in the response? And more importantly, does it make us still able to devote full concentration on something worthy?

Overwhelmed by the pace of technology

The technology and the society compel us to be faster and connected at any time (it's the price of freeing ourselves from the physical boundaries) There are countless examples of how this has completely transformed our lives.

I have two, coming from my own experience.

When I was working in Milan, I was employed in an Advertising Agency, and almost every day I was going out to lunch with my boss and colleagues; we were loyal customers at a local restaurant that was serving a convenient business lunch for a cheap price. Most of the customers in the tables next to us were businessmen, designers, or lawyers coming from the nearby courthouse. I once overheard a conversation, between a woman and a customer of hers. The phone rang while she was in the middle of a dish of spaghetti; quickly swallowing the bite she heard the interlocutor ask if he was disturbing her, considering the hour, she said "no, it's no problem of course, I'm having lunch, we definitely have time to talk for a while".

She went on several minutes talking numbers with the man, she even took out a laptop to check some data, while her pasta was slowly becoming cold.

Being always connected means, for most people, being always available to work, it means answering emails with their Blackberry from the bed, it means, as Andrejevic (2003, p. 36) argued "Entry into the digital enclosure promises us to *undo* one of the constituent spatial divisions of capitalist modernity: that between labour and leisure".

Some people find this a tool necessary to keep up with the pace set by technology. Diane, thirty-six, curator at a large Midwestern museum when interviewed by Sherry Turkle (2011, Location 3231) argues in favour of the digital technologies "I suppose I do my job better, or my whole life is my job [...] I feel like a master of the universe; everything is so efficient. I am a maximizing machine".

Needless to say, keeping in step with the networked world can be extremely stressful and time-consuming, also at the expense of those closest to us.

"Absence in Presence" is what Watkins (2009 p.48) defines as the activity of being connected with your phone (or other device) while among people.

My second example concerns one of my former colleagues, Teresa; other than being a copywriter in the Advertising Agency, she has a second job as a journalist, and she is a mother of three; the youngest, Agnese, is five, and is taking swimming lessons – every Thursday afternoon her mom brings her to the swimming pool, but without parting from her cellphone. "The last time something weird happened" she tells me one afternoon "Agnese was in the water but she was very distracted, instead of paying attention to the instructor she was constantly waving at me: 'Mamma!' she kept saying 'put away the phone and look at me', every time I was looking down at my emails". I asked if she did so, "I couldn't" she replied "I had to hand in an article by five, I would've really gotten into trouble if I didn't".

We talked for long about it, she was very worried that her daughter felt so insecure to need her constant approval, "Do you think it's serious if she notices that I don't look at her?" she asked.

Hide from each other

On the topic of the first appearance of the computer in American households Watkins (2009, pp.52-53) states: During this time, [the 90s] communication technologies in the home not only became more abundant, they also became more individualized. For the first time in American history many school-age children gained access to their own television, phone line, gaming console, and music media, turning their bedrooms and playrooms into an oasis of media, entertainment, and private leisure.

Internet communication is (at least physically) a solitary activity - as the book has been after centuries of community shared oral production - we find ourselves isolated from the surroundings, our eyes fixed on a screen, completely immersed in a world that unfolds somewhere else. "As social networks proliferate, they are changing the way people think about the Internet, from a tool used in solitary anonymity to a medium that touches on questions about human nature and identity: who we are, how we feel about ourselves, and how we act toward one another." (DiSalvo 2010)

Exhausted by the pressure of fast performance, the online world is a place to be "alone", it leaves us the space to exercise control on what kind of interactions we want to have with whom. "And the only way to filter effectively is to keep most communications online and text based" Turkle (2011, Location 3904).

Exercising control comes through carefully crafted decisions: do all of our friends deserve dedicated time face-to-face? Oftentimes, comforted by their online presence (Facebook posts, photos, emails) we are excused from having to tend to them in real life. In other words we are excused from *explicitly caring*.

Simple English

The pressure of the perpetual communication shapes our language: in order to be faster and keep up with the questions, we answer quickly, we want to be concise, straight-forward. "New technologies allow us to 'dial down' human contact, to titrate its nature and extent" This kind of communication, explains again Turkle (2011, Location 526), is not fit for a profound dialogue, for the complexity of human feelings; if online in the social networks, and in our emails and text messages we are flattened in profiles and online personas "[...] we communicate in ways that ask for almost instantaneous responses, we don't allow sufficient space to consider complicated problems".

Text based interaction, through email, text message or Social Networking websites results in a simplified representation of ourselves. Both the characteristics of those media and the underlying

speed of communication require an adaptation of our message; the outcome is a less layered interaction, stripped of emotion for all the complex layers of verbal communication are flattened into written words, the ripples and crests of handwriting transfigured to digital fonts.

On the other hand Internet connectivity (or even text messages) frees us from the boundaries of physical space: I can choose more carefully who to communicate with because physical presence is not required anymore. It allows to pick carefully who to confide in, or even confess anonymously to strangers, who one will never be forced to see face-to-face.

Simplified, text based communication can also be used as a shield, precious to protect oneself from cool receptions: not having to look a person in the eye when overflowed by feelings. Being able to communicate terrible news without showing that we are on the verge of tears, can sometimes be of help let it out more freely.

The most explicit example of letting out feelings more easily through online communications comes with confessional websites.

In such occasions our expectations on about the audience are reduced, it is important to lift us from the burden: doing so provides relief, and the reaction, however it comes, is next to irrelevant.

On confessional websites, the user reaches out to strangers, people who remain either anonymous or can only be reached through their usernames; not knowing their real identity is comforting, they could be anything we want: for what it matters they might be perfect.

Confessing to a friend involves the possibility of disapproval, confessing to a stranger does not require listening to their response; disapproval though is part of being a friend, it is a sign of care. disregard friendship because we do not hold strength for confrontation, looks to me like a step away from humanity.

gratification and public exposure

Anytime anywhere media are *always there*, waiting to be wanted, for Turkle (2011, Location 3199) "people lose a sense of choosing to communicate", this grows into an urge to share feelings at any cost, in order to give them a sense of materiality, in order to make them real, tangible. In this sense, being seen corresponds to being acknowledged: It means that we are not insignificant or alone.

Some people find gratification in this kind of public exposure, they see it as validation, in stead of violation of their privacy.

In the Post-Panopticon form of surveillance, where the watchtower is nowhere to be seen, monitoring is delegated to the public audience – it reduces the actual surveillance to produce citizens that will watch over themselves.

Broadcasting feelings through Social Networks or Blogs, is an extent of the ancient urge to look at your neighbour, at your kin, for acceptance – what in the past belonged to the local community now is confined to a blog, or to text messaging with friends. Projecting oneself in a space, the Internet, full of potential witnesses, makes us feel watched, and thus safe.

In the process of express feelings, alone in front of a computer, gives the illusion of privacy: things seem to follow the stream of communication, they are recorded instead, they can be copied, shared, and in the most extreme cases, used against us in court.

Providing the web with our most inner thoughts we are efficient instruments of our own surveillance. (Turkle 2011, Location 5001]

"Verba volant, scripta manent"¹, the Romans used to say: never has an example been more adequate.

¹ literally translated "spoken words fly away, written words remain".

References

Andrejevic M., 2003. Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched Rowman & Littlefield

Barabási A., 2011. A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites In: Papacharissi Z., ed. 2011. Routledge: pp. 7-8.

DiSalvo D., 2010. Are Social Networks Messing with your Head?, *Scientific American Mind*, January-February 2010 Issue: pp 48-55

Heim M. , 1988. Virtual Realism [online] Available at: <<http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9806/msg00026.html>> [Accessed 25 March 2011]

Turkle S. 2011. Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other, Basic Books.

Watkins S.C., 2009. The Young and the Digital. Beacon Press

Illustrations

Figure I.1 - Image and description from Papacharissi Z., 2011. A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites ed. 2011. Routledge: p. 6